"Straight to the Heart of Things"

Reflecting on Library Metaphors for Impact and Assessment

by

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Abstract

This paper explores the use and creative application of library metaphors. Unfortunately, the facts aren't always able to speak for themselves. Simply stating reference statistics, gate counts, and resource circulation numbers are not persuasive narratives in and of themselves. Voice and context needs to be given to these forms of evidence in order create connections within our communities. These connections create pathways for stakeholders to draw meaningful conclusions and thus transference of the story libraries are trying to tell. Uncovering the words and stories that resonate within our communities is challenging work. One simple and dynamic tool to begin to tell the story of our libraries is through the use of metaphor.

"Straight to the Heart of Things"

Reflecting on Library Metaphors for Impact and Assessment

I believe in words. I admire their ability to be descriptive, convey meaning, and inspire. There is a certain beauty in the flexibility of words to be both precise as well as ambiguous. Words are complex. They can encompass multiple meanings, invoke emotion, and at times get straight to the heart of things we need to know. As an assessment librarian, my job is to find the words that best describe my library to our community. I am tasked with uncovering the words that speak with the most impact and the words embedded with the most meaning. I find these words in library statistics and metrics; library research and assessment projects; and within the library experiences shared in the focus groups, interviews, and conversations we have with our patrons. These words can be assembled into a compelling narrative rooted firmly in library patron interactions, data, evidence, and research. These narratives can be used to tell the story of the library to stakeholders in a meaningful and moving way. Obviously, constructing such a narrative that is both useful and cogent is not an easy undertaking. To accomplish this task, a good assessment librarian requires the fidelity and acumen of a statistician; the observational eye and daring-do of a private detective; and the dexterity of language and soul of a poet.

Unfortunately, the facts aren't always able to speak for themselves. Simply stating reference statistics, gate counts, and resource circulation numbers are not persuasive narratives in and of themselves. Voice and context needs to be given to these forms of evidence in order to create connections within our communities. These connections create pathways for stakeholders to draw meaningful conclusions and thus transference of the

story libraries are trying to tell. Uncovering the words and stories that resonate within our communities is challenging work. One simple and dynamic tool to begin to tell the story of our libraries is through the use of *metaphor*.

Nardini (2001) suggests that metaphors within librarianship can be thought of "as any reference to the library in terms of something else" (2001, p.113). Such metaphors can be approached from a variety of viewpoints: psychological, philosophical, anthropological, linguistic, etc.; each viewpoint adds to the overall understanding. For the purposes of this article, I will try not to limit my discussion to one particular academic field. When speaking about metaphors, I will do so in its most general sense, encompassing analogies, similes and similar linguistic descriptive devices. From my perspective, metaphors are words that strike towards the essence of our common descriptive understanding of the world. In terms of libraries, a metaphor is a word or phrase attributed to libraries that invokes a shared meaning or insight. For example, in my library we use the phrase *Innovation, Heart, Ideas* to as a tag-line to describe what we do, what we encompass, and what patrons may expect from our services, environment, and collections. Indeed, expectations are an essential component embedded in metaphors. As an assessment librarian, I understand that user expectations and library value are intimately intertwined. If a library poorly communicates the expectations associated with our services, or fails to meet the expectations of a patron or stakeholder, our impact and value are forever damaged.

At Oregon State University Libraries, students and faculty can expect from the tag-line *Innovation* that our library has the latest technology, displays creative thinking for information access, and provides dynamic learning spaces for students. A library with

Heart is one that cares and listens, in addition to being at the center of campus activities. *Ideas* give the sense that the library is filled with fresh content, as well as being a place to develop and share ones thoughts. Taken as whole, these three simple words *Innovation, Heart, Ideas* encapsulate and convey multiple meanings and expectations to our users. In turn, these expectations shape a patron's understanding of our library.

The Value of Metaphors

I find that library metaphors provide an opportunity to challenge my own thinking about my workplace and organization; our issues and concerns; and how patrons view our library. Metaphors are one of the building blocks of our descriptive language and common understanding. By examining this rich description and shared meaning, I am able to discover new aspects of librarianship that I may not have considered before. Giesecke (2011) also sees library metaphors as a potent tool to infuse new thinking within librarianship. "Metaphors can provoke powerful images that can persuade others of a particular solution or point of view. They can frame a problem in a way that sets the direction for what solutions might be considered, but they do not result in canned solutions" (p.56). Griesecke is right to point out that metaphors do not offer up "canned solutions" to library problems. Many solutions in librarianship are rarely off the shelf, instead requiring a nuanced approach to complex information access problems that need constant assessment and refinement. Alternatively, what metaphors create are new avenues for not only thinking about how to tackle library concerns, but also tools to communicate our successes. Burge (2004) supports the idea that metaphoric thinking can

re-energize thinking about libraries and library services. In reflecting on the teaching

practice of librarians, Burge suggests that we:

> Develop similes, metaphors, images or analogies that challenge familiar mindsets
>
> or enable the unpacking of traditional labels or practices. Asking, "Is my teaching
>
> at all comparable to jazz improvisation? or "How might a teaching librarian be
>
> like a cat?" enables us to unpack multiple sub-concepts in 'jazz' and 'catness' and
>
> use them as possible 'bridges' into new ways of seeing our daily behaviors. (2004,
>
> p.13)

Building these "bridges" into new ways of seeing, are also about creating insights into

new ways of knowing and communicating about libraries. Trying on different metaphors

during self-reflection is an excellent opportunity for librarians to consider how others

might view their own library practices or services. In discussing the selection of

educational metaphors, Grumet (1988) points out that, "A metaphor will influence not

only what is described but also the form the description takes, its knowledge claims, and

the response of those who attend to it" (p. 80). Grumet also notes the potential for

metaphors to combine "observation with hope" (p.80). This idea of "observation with

hope" is a compelling embodiment of metaphors. I am very much drawn to this idea of

re-framing patron expectations into something positive and uplifting, more akin to "hope".

As an assessment librarian, the more positive expectations that can be engendered in

association with libraries, the easier it will be to tell our story.

Metaphors engage multiple levels of understanding or what cognitive linguist

scholars Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggest as our "imaginative rationality". This

"imaginative rationality" unites both our reason and imagination encompassing "our

feelings, aesthetic experiences, moral practices, and spiritual awareness" (p.193).

Internally, metaphors provide "new insights and hypothesis" while externally they are

used as "mediators between the human mind and culture" (MacCormac, 1985, p.2).

Hamilton (2000) notes that the use of metaphors "embeds relationships" (p.239). It is

these embedded relationships between the patron and the library that are worth

uncovering, acknowledging, and building from. Grumet (1988) cautions that metaphors

"illuminate", as well as "leave others in the shadows" (p.80). This is a good reminder that

metaphor selection is a deliberate process involving equal parts exactitude and ambiguity.

Finding the right balance is a challenge. As libraries serve more diverse audiences, some

metaphors may not have the intended impact with patrons whose primary language is not

English. Often libraries will need to employ multiple metaphors to better communicate

with all stakeholder audiences.

The Limits of the *Library* as Metaphor

I believe metaphors are of particular value to libraries because they frame patron

comprehension, inspire library direction, and can be used to illuminate the potential of a

library. Unfortunately, describing a library as a *library* does not always achieve the

desired results when we communicate with our stakeholders, funding agents, or

communities. The library as a self-referential metaphor is still entangled in librarian

stereotypes and the deeply rooted definition of a library as simply a storehouse for books.

Salinero & Grogg (2005) provide a bibliography of the various articles found in the

literature railing against librarian stereotypes. Yet, these limiting assumptions remain a

challenge for libraries to overcome. Smith and Yachnes (1998) suggest that, "The general

script for behavior in a library is very similar to the one that applies in churches,

museums, art galleries, or concert halls -- all use of the underlying categorization of

scared space from which we are barred such profane items and behaviors as noise, food,

drink, and boisterous behavior" (p.726). Library assessment has an important role to play

in breaking down these outdated stereotypes and traditional assumptions. Assessment is

one tool to help 'flip the script' by communicating a more robust story of the library

through evidence, value, and impacts. We all need to do a better job framing these library

accomplishments and outcomes within the descriptive language that speaks loudest to our

stakeholders. I believe metaphors offer one pathway to make progress on this mission.

At best, the average patron's understanding of the functions, processes and

purposes of a library may be characterized as incomplete. In trying to comprehend the

library, a patron may attempt to apply past experiences to this sometimes unfamiliar

environment. Metaphors provide a ready-made context within which to place the familiar

and unfamiliar environments we encounter. The expectation that patrons will come to the

library with a metaphorical framework similar to librarians is unrealistic. As Giesecke

(2011) notes about the use of metaphor in libraries, "Because metaphors reflect

conceptual or mental models, metaphors can be used to identify how someone perceives a

particular institution, situation, idea, or how they look at things" (p.55-56). In comparison

to librarians, patrons approach libraries from a distinctly different start point. Most

patrons stepping into the library do not have the benefit of a library graduate degree or

the years of experience working in a library to develop an in-depth theoretical and

practical understanding of the library and what it can encompass. For example, a patron

unfamiliar with the library may frame their understanding within the metaphorical

construct of a bookstore. This bookstore metaphor will then influence the patron's expectations of the library, its organization, and services. Within this framework, the patron may believe the library shelves materials alphabetically by author or expect that the library has a cafe that serves coffee. When the characteristics of this bookstore metaphor are not met, the patron may become disoriented or even dissatisfied with library service. In addition, this metaphor may not serve to explain other areas of the library, such as the role of the reference librarian as someone who can answer high level research questions, or that the patron has access to electronic databases and content, as these services are not available in your typical bookstore.

Another symptom of faulty conceptual library frameworks is found within the language patrons use to describe library services. As a librarian, we often hear patrons state things about the library that seem out of context or rankle the ear. For example, sometimes patrons ask to "rent" a book, instead of the typical library vernacular of "borrow", "check-out", or "lend". In this instance the patron may be operating from a *video store* or other such metaphor that associates book lending as a monetary transaction dealing with fees. While this may seem on the face of it to be a simple misunderstanding of library terminology, it in fact disassociates the idea that library resources are freely available to community members. The language patrons use to describe the library offers distinct clues as to what metaphorical framework they might be operating from and in turn what expectations they have of the library. Nitecki (1993) posits that library users may use metaphors in describing their perception of library problems and such use of language would reflect their "conceptual models of libraries" (p.258). For librarians, the library is compared to other libraries. For patrons, the library is often compared, for better

or worse, to past experiences which may or may not include the library as reference point. Metaphors offer up a sense-making device that draws from past experiences, and provides a framework from which the patron can navigate the library. Libraries are indeed daunting and complex, it is no wonder a patron may want to employ a more comfortable and familiar (albeit sometimes incomplete) metaphoric framework in which to place their understanding of this sometimes intimidating resource. This incomplete framework may help explain some of the communication breakdowns that occur within the library and adds a hurdle libraries must overcome to effectively reach out to patrons. Thus, the thoughtful development and deployment of library metaphors play an important role in the rewarding interactions and undertakings patrons have in their libraries.

Describing the Library as Something Else – Metaphors at Work in the Library

Metaphors and libraries have a rich and historical association with each other dating back to the beginning of librarianship in the United States (Nardini, 2001). For example, one of the most common academic library metaphors, that of the library being the *heart of the university,* has been around since at least 1922 (Nitecki, 1993, p.260). A good starting point for exploring this unique relationship is Nardini's article: *A Search for Meaning: American Library Metaphors, 1876-1926* (2001). Nardini identifies three core metaphors that libraries have employed to help formulate the public's perception of the library. The first metaphor is that of a *school* or *university* in which the library is valued as an educational tool for the public. In this understanding of the library, the librarian then becomes seen not just as a custodian of the stacks but assumes the role of teacher of great things. In this context, the library is championed as the "people's university",

especially when speaking about public libraries. The educational metaphor is a strong component of the early rhetoric of libraries and continues to this day mirrored in early literacy programs and academic library instruction on information literacy.

The second metaphor Nardini notes is that of the *church*. Here, the library holds knowledge in a high, almost sacred, regard. Librarians are transformed into "missionaries of the book" to disseminate this knowledge to needy patrons. While on the surface this somewhat pretentious association may seem outdated, a recent article in *American Libraries* illustrates the staying power of this core metaphor invoking the "old-fashioned church" to describe the library as "heavenly place" where patrons "approach the reference desk with a confession" (Maxwell, 2006). A close examination of this metaphor still finds a surprising relevance to the mission of libraries... for what is a church but a community of readers (in the church's case a bible) who seek knowledge, serve the greater community, and aim to help their fellow man. These are all worthy tenets for libraries to continue to aspire towards in the communities they operate.

The last core metaphor Nardini (2001) identifies is that of *business* or *industry*. Earlier use of this metaphor viewed the library as a *workshop*, *laboratory*, or *quarry of knowledge*. The business metaphor eventually evolved into the *selling* of the library and its services to the public. This metaphor continues to be embraced by today's libraries and is evident in treating patrons as *consumers* of information or *customers* of library services. Within this business metaphor framework librarians transform themselves into *information professionals* trained in customer relations to better serve all the library's stakeholders. Additionally, such library organizational concepts as Total Quality Management (TQM), flat hierarchical organizational models, and patron-driven

acquisitions all draw inspiration from the business world and further serve to illustrate the metaphor of the library as business.

Another comprehensive look at library metaphors was undertaken by Nitecki (1993) who examined library metaphors associated with university faculty and administrator communication. Nitecki noted that administrators, faculty, and librarians each tended to use different types of metaphors when talking about libraries. Nitecki suggested that these differing metaphor are of particular importance as they form the conceptual models through which faculty and administrators view the library. As an assessment librarian, it is of particular consequence to pay attention to these conceptual models as this will give clues about how to best frame the library to these important stakeholders. Nitecki identified fourteen library metaphors in the study.

- Library as *activist*
- Library as *partners*
- Library as *electronic access*
- Library as *object of ownership*
- Library as *storehouse*
- Library as *location*
- Library as *name*

- Library as *within struggle*
- Library as *economic model*
- Library as *theory*
- Library as *within a race*
- Library as *distributor*
- Library as *school*
- Library as *measure of academic quality*

Of these metaphors, Nitecki found that administrators and librarians shared three: library as *partners*; library as *activist*; and library as *economic model*. Combined, these metaphors frame the library as a decision maker and team-player with spending power to acquire needed resources. However, librarians also associated the metaphors of *storehouse* and *object of ownership* with their enterprise while administrators attributed

to the library as a place to get *electronic access*. These slight differences in library descriptions foretell the current shift in library thinking away from the *ownership* to metaphor to one of *access*. Nitecki's article strongly suggests that our stakeholders often operate from different conceptual models that are manifested in the metaphors they use. Uncovering these metaphors offers an opportunity for libraries to strategically leverage these conceptual models to their advantage through re-framing services, managing expectations, and communicating value.

A more recent study by Giesecke (2011) examined the role metaphors may have in helping frame technological and organizational change in libraries. Giesecke identified five general areas that library metaphors tend to fall into. These areas include:

- Library as *body part*

- Library as *conversation*

- Library as *place*

- *Digital*, "*e*", and *2.0*

- *Ecology*

For Giesecke, the ecology metaphor, where the library is an "ecosystem that promotes biodiversity" (p.61), resonated the most. The ecology metaphor was "helpful in describing for librarians, professional and technical staff the need to change and why we need new skills in our workforce to stay relevant in a changing environment" (p.64). Giesecke's use of metaphor is a great example about the practical application these concepts can afford to make real changes in thinking about libraries and their role.

Of course there are still many more metaphors at play within our libraries. Librarians employ many different metaphors to describe library research to patrons

(McMillen and Hill, 2004; Fain, 2001). Libraries also try out different metaphors with staff to "imagine new roles, cope with change, climb outside the box, and repackage our services" (Giesecke, 2011, p. 51). Current use of metaphor in conjunction with libraries abounds all the way from the traditional refrain of "the library as the heart of the campus" (Grimes, 1998) to the idea of Library 2.0, or the library as *conversation* (Lankes & Silverstein, 2006). Black has examined the library within the conceptual framework of a *clinic* (2005). Weinberger suggests we look at the library as *platform* that provides an infrastructure for ideas not simply a *portal* for resources (2012). We even hear libraries metaphorically describing themselves as *kitchens* or *test kitchens* to cook up new creations (Frye Williams, 2008; Kong, Brautigam, & O'Connell, 2011). Similarly the makerspace movement is transforming thinking about libraries as *laboratories* for patrons to test and build things. Some library spaces even envision themselves as *candy shops*, *toy stores*, and *playgrounds* (Smith and Yanchnes, 1998). All in all, library metaphors are still a rich and active vehicle to describe and envision library services and patron interactions.

An Activity to Explore Metaphors in your Library:

A worthwhile exercise for librarians and libraries is take some time to reflect on the metaphors potentially operating in association with your library. I find this sort of activity helpful in exploring the alignment between what I think we do, what we actually do, and what others think we do. The results of this reflection also suggest possible ways we might communicate with our stakeholders in a more meaningful manner. Undertaking

an examination of library metaphors allows for an in-depth exploration of three factors that may shape overall library perception. This sort of guided reflection provides an opportunity for libraries to:

1. Reevaluate and refine the internal and external definitions of the library and its services.

2. Recognize external visions of the library employed by patrons that may differ than those of librarians and library.

3. Inspire and define the direction the library for both librarians and patrons.

Below are a series of questions librarians can ask themselves about the metaphors associated with their library. These questions consider how metaphors are used within your library, by your patrons, and by your stakeholders. Identifying commonalities or gaps from your answers creates a space to consider how to bridge these perceptions. I suggest discussing these questions in small groups as well as reflecting on them on your own. This is also an opportunity to try on a new or unfamiliar metaphor that as Burge (2004) suggests may "challenge familiar mindsets or enable the unpacking of traditional labels or practices" (p.13).

1. **List some common metaphors you personally use to describe your library and its users.** I often like to say our library is the *heart* of intellectual activity on campus. Another metaphor I use with students is to think of the library as their *personal network*, that behind every book, article or library resource there is a network of library professionals acquiring, cataloging, and making these items

discoverable. Furthermore students can tap into the expertise in this network through the multiple reference and research services libraries offer.

2. **What metaphors does the library as an organization use to describe itself either formally or informally?** Luckily for me, our library describes itself with the phrase *Innovation*, *Heart*, *Ideas*. These words provides not only a good framework to talk with our stakeholders but also act as guideposts for our own library-related activities.

3. **In general, the public operates from what metaphorical concept when in your library?** This question requires a bit more deep reflection on my part. Based on some observations, conversations, and assessment data, I think our students operate from an *office* metaphor within our library. Students come to the library to *work*, use our resources for printing and computer access, and study spaces as offices. Based on discussions with faculty, I find that many still view the library as place to acquire needed resources or information. In these cases faculty operate from a metaphor of that library as *storehouse* or resource *access* point.

4. **What metaphors are used to describe your library resources to patrons?** In reviewing our website and promotional literature, I see that we use descriptive language such as *heart* in regards to location; a sharing theme of *commons*, *partner*, and *collaboration;* and finally the library as a place to get *help, personal* or *personalized services.*

5. **What are the metaphors your library aspires to be associated with?** Traditionally libraries might associate themselves with the metaphors of *collections*, *literacy*, or even *access*. After reflecting on this, I think there are two

metaphors that my library is currently aspiring to and they involve the concepts of *research* and *learning*. Our library is interested in better positioning itself as an integral part of the faculty research process on campus. This includes making the library a go-to partner for data management planning, including the library as a grant collaborator, and integrating librarian expertise. A *research* metaphor frames the library as research center with research collections, librarian-researchers, and research-related services.

Learning is the other area I believe our library is hoping to make a stronger impact. This is evidenced by the increased teaching emphasis placed on our librarians, the allocation of library resources for the learning assessment, and the inclusion of "enriching academic impact" as a significant goal within the recent redesign of my library's strategic plan.

Based on my reflection on these questions, there are many different metaphors and frameworks associated with my library. While there might be some alignment around the centrality of *heart of campus* metaphor, Grimes (1998) points out some drawbacks with this particular metaphor as it lacks precision, is self-limiting, sentimental, and conveys misconceptions to students. Grimes sums up, "Because people have used the 'heart of the university' metaphor in so many ways, it has no power to inform the practice of academic librarianship" (p. 6). Based on Grimes assessment my library has some work to do building stronger connections to other metaphors such as *office* or *learning* that our stakeholders may value.

I want to emphasize that there is not necessarily a unified or universal metaphor for libraries but a complement of metaphors that help to inform and define. That is to say there are no "right" answers to these guided reflection questions. The overall picture of one's library is formed by a constellation of descriptors, where depending on the context certain metaphors shine brighter or with more relevance than others. Each library may also possess unique metaphors specific to that institution depending on the library's mission, its role in the community, or desired aspirational goal. These unique metaphors may not translate into other contexts. Keep in mind; the process of a library's self-examination in considering the applicability of a metaphor is just as important as deciding on a metaphor that fits. Examining how a library meets the expectations of a metaphor or how the metaphor provides a context for a patron to better navigate the library provides a platform for reflection and reevaluation. More simply put, we derive a greater understanding of ourselves in examining the way we chose to describe ourselves and place within our communities.

Conclusion: Examining the Expectation Agenda

Library assessment is more than numbers; it includes the perceptions of our patrons, the story the library is trying to tell, and the reality of the library experience encountered by our users. Metaphors set the agenda for the expectations our patrons and stakeholders have about the library. This agenda, in part, determines the perceived value in how we meet these expectations. Examining, understanding, and reflecting on the metaphors associated with one's library are critical to the effective communication of value and impact. Unfortunately, this examination is not always a straightforward process

resulting in black and white results. As a meaning-making device metaphors can offer a

shortcut that taps into emotion and prior knowledge; however metaphors can also be

imprecise and ambiguous. It is this ambiguity that allows metaphors to be flexible and

adaptable to different patron experiences. Griseckie (2011) reminds us "Library leaders

have struggled for many years to find the right metaphor to describe the importance of

libraries and librarians. No one has found the perfect metaphor that adequately describes

the complexity of the research library in terms that resonate with the world outside our

walls" (p.64). Despite the ease it might bring to library cataloging, libraries do not

possess absolute certainty in the descriptive understanding of the world. Libraries do the

best they can in organizing and communicating their collections, resources, and services

to patrons and stakeholders. Metaphors provide a way to illuminate library

understanding; and instill emotional and imaginative meaning for our users. Metaphors

are not complete descriptors of what libraries may encompass but one important piece in

that narrative we construct about our role within our communities. Lakoff and Johnson

suggest, "(m)etaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor

may thus be a guide for future action. Such actions will, of course, fit the metaphor. This

will, in turn, reinforce the power of the metaphor to make experience coherent. In this

sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies" (1980, p.156). Libraries would do

well to guide the creation of these "social realities" to better position themselves in more

meaningful and coherent ways within our patron's framework of the world. At its most

basic, library metaphors are intended to tap into what our users already know and are

comfortable with. This is a strategy to provide familiarity, reduce anxiety, and convey

information quickly about what to expect within a library. Taking the time to reflect on

the library metaphors embedded within the community each library serves will reap worthwhile rewards in providing more meaningful communication and understanding in how best to connect with our patrons.

As an assessment librarian trying to find the ways to best communicate with students, faculty, and university administrators, metaphors offer an easy "in" . This initial entry point with stakeholders provides an opportunity for building more meaningful understanding, insight, and common appreciation for the library's role in their lives. I take the metaphors associated with my library seriously and will continue to leverage their potential to my library's advantage. For as I said… I believe in words. Words, that when carefully chosen, can tell the story of the library in a compelling and insightful manner. If I believe words, I therefore must believe in metaphors too. I believe metaphors are a vehicle for deep and imaginative connection between libraries and their stakeholders. As Grumet, noted metaphors create an opportunity to combine "observation with hope" (1988, p.80). The better libraries and librarians reflect on this idea of "hope", the better we'll be able to unpack the expectations and aspirations for what our libraries are, and can become for our users.

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